

As city officials seek to shift blame onto parents

## Chicago house fire claims ninth victim

**Kristina Betinis**  
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Early Sunday morning, eight children ranging in age from three months to sixteen years, were killed in an apartment fire on Sacramento Avenue in the Little Village neighborhood of Chicago's Lower West Side. A ninth child died from his injuries Monday night. One teenaged boy remains in critical condition.

The nine children killed were identified by family as Maya Almaraz, 3 months; Ariel Garcia, 5; Lonni Ayala, 3; Gialanni Ayala, 5; Giovanni Ayala, 10; Xavier Contreras, 11; Nathan Contreras, 13; Cesar Contreras, 15; and Victor Mendoza, 16.

Four children from one family, three children from another family and friends of the children were reported to be having a sleepover when the fire broke out and spread to neighboring buildings in the early hours of Sunday morning.

The tragedy has affected the city profoundly. An outpouring of grief and community support has come in the form of donations, an ongoing memorial and vigil on Sacramento Avenue, and sympathies expressed on the street and on social media.

Marilyn Vega, a school worker, wrote on one of the several GoFundMe pages receiving thousands of dollars to support the affected families: "My deepest and sincere condolences. Nathan (Nene) was my student. He was like my son. I loved that little boy so much. I can't believe this has happened to all these babies. I am so heartbroken. I will always remember Nate."

Fourteen households are reported to have been affected by the blaze. Community groups, friends and family members are working quickly to raise the thousands needed for medical care for the surviving children and burial costs for the deceased.

The Sacramento Avenue fire is the deadliest in Chicago in more than a decade. Fire Department First

Deputy District Chief Annette Nance Holt said, "I can't even count back to when we lost this many lives."

Firefighters went door-to-door Monday on the blocks surrounding Sacramento and Cermak, distributing fire safety information and smoke detectors.

No smoke detectors were found at the Sacramento Avenue property by fire officials, who stated that the fire originated on a second-floor enclosed porch. Its cause appears to be still undetermined. A statement by Larry Langford of the Chicago Fire Department suggested the cause might have been fireworks or cigarettes. Based on the findings of one engineer with the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, officials have ruled out an electrical cause.

The owners of the building at 2224 S. Sacramento have a history of serious building code violations at the property, failing four of seven inspections in three years. City records indicate that tenants have complained of vermin, including bedbugs, cockroaches and rats, doors falling off their hinges and sinking floors. The first floor of the property where the fire originated was unoccupied and boarded up.

Violations this year include electrical problems. A statement obtained from the city Buildings Department reads: "The Department of Buildings inspected 2224 S. Sacramento Ave. on June 8, 2018 in response to a complaint from a tenant. As a result of this inspection, the building was cited for two electrical violations, one for grounding in the front of the building and one for an illegal electrical cord going from the front building to the coach house, and a court date is set for September 24, 2018."

John, a resident of the neighborhood, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* on Sunday and expressed his shock at the owners' response: "The building owners

were out here in the morning and all they could say was that they were so angry that the firefighters broke the windows of their property so they could get the people inside. But you know, windows can be replaced. You cannot replace a life."

As the dilapidated condition of the property came to light on Monday, along with a lengthy list of complaints from prior tenants, city and state officials made statements that sought to shift the focus onto the families.

George Cardenas, 12th Ward alderman, leader of the Chicago Latino caucus and close supporter and financial backer of Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel, shamelessly attempted to incriminate the families. He posed the question to the local ABC News outlet: "Leaving an infant, three months old, in the hands of a sixteen-year old, the oldest. And you have a three-year-old, a five-year-old, a nine-year-old, a ten-year-old. What were they thinking?"

Cardenas also referred to alleged "gang activity" on the property.

By Monday evening it was reported that Alissandra Calderon, a spokeswoman for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, had confirmed that the agency was investigating allegations of neglect involving the children killed and injured.

The conditions facing Chicago's impoverished working-class neighborhoods are the product of decades of deindustrialization, austerity, corporate tax giveaways and real estate investment schemes that have enriched the financial aristocracy at the expense of the great majority of the population.

Little Village has been a predominantly Mexican-American neighborhood for the better part of 50 years and is home to generations of immigrant families. Known as "La Villita," the neighborhood is poor, with a median annual household income of about \$35,000 and a third of residents living below the official poverty line. Only half of the community has attained a high school diploma, while about 20 percent have had some college or university experience.

La Villita includes the second largest retail-shopping district in the city of Chicago. It is widely known among Mexican-American families as a place to get a taste of home, and the commercial strip grosses \$900 million per year. Banks and business owners anticipate rapidly growing profits in real estate and retail in the

area.

The displacement of working-class families through real estate investment in this area of the city has been underway for more than a decade. Neighboring Pilsen, also a historically Mexican-American neighborhood, has been subjected to an aggressive gentrification plan.

Some working-class and elderly households that were displaced have moved into the adjacent neighborhoods of Little Village and Lawndale. Many have moved out of the city entirely and into the suburbs. These shifts in population and rent increases have broadly affected housing costs in the area and incentivized profiteering.



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